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TOURNAMENT TIME

College Heights Herald • Special Section • March 19, 2010

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Still alive



MARY TAYLOR COWLES
Head coach

“

If you're a competitor, then that's exactly what you want to do — continue to play and have the opportunity to compete.”

Lady Tops ready to make most of WNIT bid

By ZACH GREENWELL
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After the Lady Toppers fell to Middle Tennessee in the semifinals of the Sun Belt Tournament, they didn't watch the women's NCAA tournament selection show on Monday from the edge of their seats.

There was no ticket to the Big Dance — only hope for a berth in the Women's National Invitation Tournament that might be coming.

Then Arkansas-Little Rock received an at-large bid to the NCAA tournament — a surprising second bid from the Sun Belt — and Western's postseason fire started burning again.

“I think it's just a given in our program that we're going to take advantage of opportunities to compete and represent WKU,” Head Coach Mary Taylor Cowles said. “The ultimate goal is to obviously play in the Big Dance and get to the NCAA tournament, but we knew with the loss to Middle in the semifinals that that wasn't going to happen. But they quickly focused their attention and their efforts on, ‘OK, let's take advantage of this opportunity.’”

UALR's inclusion in the NCAA tournament secured an automatic WNIT bid for the Lady Toppers (21-10) as the next highest finisher in the Sun Belt, and they'll begin their postseason journey when they host Illinois in the first round tonight.

“Nobody wants to finish their career with a loss,” senior forward Dominique Duck said. “That Middle Tennessee game was a heartbreaker. It was tough because we had fought so hard to get back in the game, and we just never dropped our heads.

“To be able to get another chance to pick up some wins and go out on top is

big for us.”

Western last competed in the WNIT in 2007 when the Lady Toppers lost to Wisconsin in the semifinals.

The program made the NCAA tournament in 2008, but last season's 16-13 record brought no invitations from the WNIT or elsewhere.

So Cowles said the Lady Toppers are hungry for postseason play, no matter what the stakes are.

“If you're a competitor, then that's exactly what you want to do — continue to play and have the opportunity to compete,” she said. “Postseason play can be very, very valuable for a basketball team, and we've really seemed to take advantage of that in years past.”

The Lady Tops last met Illinois (16-14) in a first-round loss in the 2002 WNIT.

They will seek revenge for that defeat without two of their young guards, as it was announced Wednesday that freshmen Lashay Davis (7.4 points per game) and Courtney Clifton (4.1 ppg) have decided to leave the team.

Senior guard Kenzie Rich said the remaining guards will have to make up for lost contributions of both freshmen, especially the sixth-man Davis.

But Rich said the team has all the tools to advance to the second round, where either Marquette or Eastern Illinois awaits.

“We always give it our all, but I really think we're going to give it on Friday night,” Rich said. “We want to end our season with a win — not a loss — so we're all really excited to be back in Diddle.”

Game time is set for 7 p.m. Friday in Diddle Arena. Tickets are \$5 for students, although the first 100 will be admitted free.

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Western fails to meet fans' expectations

By COLE CLAYBOURN

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With the NCAA tournament tipping off this weekend, Western fans now find themselves in an unfamiliar situation.

For the past two years, they watched the Toppers pull off victories in dramatic fashion, culminating in a run to the Sweet 16 in 2008 and the round of 32 in 2009.

But there won't be any postseason magic this year from Western, as their NCAA tournament bid was cut short by a loss to Troy in the semifinals of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament. The Toppers were also left off the list for the National Invitational Tournament, effectively ending their season.

Several fans are calling this season a disappointment, despite the team winning 21 games.

"We had the talent to run the Sun Belt this year, and we lost a lot of close games that we should've won," Louisville sophomore Dennon Blankenship said. "We had two of the most productive players in WKU history and couldn't do anything with it."

Blankenship said the 13 losses that team had stuck out more to him than the 21 wins.

"The university keeps pushing the idea that we should be included with the University of Kentucky and University of Louisville, but if we're going to be included in talks of state basketball, we have to perform the standards that we give ourselves, which we didn't this year," he said.

Louisville freshman Derrick McDonald said 21 wins is a good number, but early losses and a five-game losing

streak in January were detrimental to the team's resume.

Blankenship said fans have come to expect the team to make it to the NCAA tournament every year based on the success they've had in the conference and against tough non-conference competition.

"Since we've been pretty dominant in the conference the past three or so seasons, and the fact that we run with good teams, I think expectations are now in place," Blankenship said.

He added that since the team underperformed this season, he thinks many Western students will lose interest and start following teams such as Kentucky and Louisville more so than Western.

Beaver Dam sophomore Travis Taylor said that even though the season was disappointing compared to the past two, he still saw positive signs for the future of the program.

"We got to see some of the talent of our freshmen like Caden Dickerson and Jamal Crook," Taylor said. "We got to see just how good they can be. We had a couple of memorable wins along the way, too, over Vanderbilt and Mississippi State."

Taylor said the season was still exciting, but was filled with several "ups and downs."

"We had some pretty good wins and some disappointing losses," he said. "Those disappointing losses showed just how important the seeding is in the conference tournament because we didn't get the first-round bye. You could see in the second game how tired the players were, and we just didn't have any energy to pull off the win."



MEN'S BASKETBALL

Western misses its biggest shot for success

By JONATHAN LINTNER

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Head Coach Ken McDonald said he constantly tells the Toppers that they shouldn't settle for a good shot when they could instead take a great shot.

The 2009-2010 season was expected to be one great shot, but instead Western (21-13) fell to Troy 54-48 in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament's semifinals.

The Toppers missed out on invitations to the NCAA and National Invitational tournaments as a result, coming up short of McDonald's expectations to build on a tournament experience in his first year as coach.

"We have a good basketball team,

and we had certain expectations from the start of the season," McDonald said. "We put that out there and on ourselves, and honestly, things didn't go exactly as you script it. But you have to make it go your way. There were times this year that we didn't make it go our way."

Senior guard A.J. Slaughter said unfortunate situations such as Western's all happen for a reason.

Slaughter said he won't remember the disappointments, the letdowns and the losses as much as he'll remember how the Toppers handled all of them.

"That's what I'm going to look back most on — that we stuck together, and it was a brotherhood," Slaughter said. "When our backs were against the wall,

we just fought."

Falling short of expectations started with an early loss to Louisiana State, forcing the Toppers to miss the NIT Tip-off in New York City. Then Western lost to Indiana State, breaking its home-win streak that ran through all of last season.

Also, junior forward Sergio Kersch went down with a broken foot before the Toppers' loss to Louisville in December.

From there, Western's at-large fate in the NCAA tournament was sealed. But the Toppers weren't done, finishing with a 9-3 record upon Kersch's return.

"We really turned it around," McDonald said. "I think it's a true testament of the character and the work ethics of the players and the coaching

staff that we turned it around. We hit some tough stretches for WKU basketball, and I think everyone knows that."

Throughout a five-game losing streak in February, McDonald repeatedly said his team just wasn't playing hard enough.

Kersch echoed that, saying the effort sometimes wasn't there.


But by the time Western eventually took its final blow to Troy on March 8, Kersch said the Toppers were no longer disappointed in themselves — just satisfied with the effort.

"You saw a team just lay it all out there," Kersch said. "The end result was that we just couldn't pull it out that time."

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Mendez-Valdez still succeeding

By JONATHAN LINTNER
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Ever since he wowed the country with a 25-point performance against Gonzaga in the 2009 NCAA tournament, Orlando Mendez-Valdez might have Western fans wondering where former Topper guard went.

For at least a few days, the now-professional Mexican basketball player returned to Bowling Green for the first time as an alumnus — an experience he said brought back both positive memories and feelings.

“I can’t lie — I miss a lot,” he said.

Mendez-Valdez now plays for the Halcones (Falcons) Uv Xalapa, a member of the Liga Nacional de Baloncesto in Mexico.

He said the team is strictly professional, with no scholarships and no classes, but Xalapa, like many Latin American professional teams, is tied directly to the Universidad Veracruzana in Mexico.

The Falcons won the league championship on March 10, their third title in a row and fourth since the club’s inception in 2003.

Mendez-Valdez said he signed with the team after following a close friend’s advice, and this season — along with the money that came with it — worked out nicely.

“I already knew what I was getting myself into with that kind of team, but (the championship) was huge,” he said. “All of Latin America was watching.”

Athletics Director Wood Selig said he could see that sort of success coming from a player that “showed nothing” after his freshman season and eventually developed into one of Western’s most

memorable faces.

“Some people are just leaders. Some people are just winners. Some people are just competitors and refuse to lose,” Selig said. “Orlando is all of that rolled into a very athletic basketball player.”

Mendez-Valdez averaged 13.0 points in 23.8 minutes a game for Xalapa, enough to earn him an invite back for next year’s team as well as a tryout with the NBA’s San Antonio Spurs.

With all that has changed in less than a year, Mendez-Valdez still has his same sense of fashion. He wore a white T-shirt, worn jeans and fine-tipped gelled hair on his first full day back in Bowling Green.

Mendez-Valdez is also engaged to volleyball player Aquila Orr and has set a June 19 wedding date.

Until then, Mendez-Valdez said he’ll continue to live in his apartment in Mexico, where he relies on a laptop to communicate with his friends and family in the United States, once he leaves the country again on Sunday.

Head Coach Ken McDonald said it’s been difficult but worth it to keep in contact with his former senior leader.

“I told him I disowned him — that he was no longer one of my boys,” McDonald said, laughing. “We were laughing about that, because he doesn’t have a phone, so he said we’d either have to Skype, or I could text him at some random number, and he would get it.”

Mendez-Valdez said he’s not sure where he’ll be playing basketball next year, whether it be for Xalapa or an NBA D-League team. But he’s not looking past the big day or the nerves that come along with getting married.

“It’s just having my family there, having her family there, having alcohol — it’s going to be fun, and I hope in a good way,” he said.

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